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DGAP COMMENTARY

Britain's Reckoning with the Future



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Brexit talks have entered extra time. If the UK is to leave the EU in an orderly manner, it needs a deal in the next four weeks. The trouble is that, as the prospect of leaving becomes more concrete, the government has finally recognized that it needs to honor the promises it has made to voters. Prime Minister Boris Johnson is struggling to reconcile his vague pledges with real world constraints – both internationally and domestically.

Back in 2016, when he was a backbench MP during the referendum campaign, Boris Johnson set out an attractive vision of Britain's future outside the EU. In it, he made vague and rosy promises to voters, particularly to party supporters in the English heartlands, about the benefits of "taking back control." After becoming prime minister in 2019, he continued in the same vein, presenting his Withdrawal Agreement as bringing benefits for all parts of the UK.

But as Brexit negotiations draw to a close, Johnson is discovering just how hard it is to rectify his conflicting promises with one another let alone with international realities. On September 9, his government published its Internal Market Bill, which tries to square one such circle. While Johnson had previously pledged that there

would be no customs border between Britain and Northern Ireland, this pledge has been exposed as a falsehood. The inconsistency needs fixing, and there is no provision under EU law for London to do so unilaterally.

In order to make good on the prime minister's pledge, the UK plans to break its Withdrawal Agreement with the EU and international law besides. More worrying still: although this maneuver is proving explosive in the EU, it appears to be merely a side issue for Johnson. He is far more interested in appeasing his constituents in England's heartlands than unionists in Northern Ireland. Voters in England have forged their own clear and very diverse expectations of what Brexit should entail. They are now calling in the promises made.

WE'RE AGAINST, BUT WHAT ARE WE FOR?

During the 2016 referendum and 2019 election campaigns, Boris Johnson succeeded in speaking to wildly different groups of voters: from entrepreneurs in England's southeast to the disadvantaged in its northeast; from nostalgic advocates of an Anglosphere (a projected geopolitical grouping with the United States, Canada, New Zealand,

and Australia) to those with family links to “the Commonwealth” (today, shorthand for anglophone Africa and the Indian subcontinent).

This has left a difficult legacy. While “leave” united all those who could agree with the statement “the EU holds us back,” there are two different faiths sitting in that broad church of malcontents. On the one hand, the people of the dilapidated industrial towns of the north feel held back by the EU’s restrictive stance on state aid. On the other, the golf-playing business executives of leafy southern England feel held back by the EU’s excessive protectionism. These two groups have very different ideas of post-Brexit policy.

Likewise, while all sorts of people could agree that the EU is an “anachronism on the world stage,” two distinct understandings of its meaning have emerged. One group feels that the large border-free EU exposes it to threats brewing in the world’s unstable East and South. The other feels that the EU’s parochial internal market cuts it off from vibrant opportunities there. The two groups disagree on whether the UK should forge relations with, say, China, especially if the United States cuts it adrift.

THE RIGHT HONORABLE BORIS JOHNSON

Since negotiations on the future EU-UK relationship began in January, Johnson has been desperately trying to avoid alienating any part of his fan base. Although the EU demanded clarity on issues such as the UK’s intentions for state aid, he refused to respond. Johnson made a virtue of his indecision, weaponizing the ambiguity in order to unsettle Brussels. As recently as a fortnight ago, most observers believed talks would end with Johnson still playing chicken with himself.

But then Europe woke up to find a different kind of prime minister. Gone was indecisive Boris “two op-eds” Johnson, the man who, in February 2016, notoriously drafted two alternative newspaper articles, one expressing ardent support for Vote Leave, the other committing to Remain. In his stead sat a politician so committed to his agenda that he would burn bridges for it. Whereas the early stages of the negotiations were defined by Johnson’s lack of scruples, the end phase is being determined by his sense of honor.

The prime minister has not, in fact, undergone a character change. While Johnson certainly deserves his reputation for misleading voters, it is worth remembering that he did so because he wants to be popular. This desire to be liked by voters constitutes a visceral form of political accountability. Boored on the streets of London in 2016 for running a dishonest Brexit campaign, Johnson pitched his bid for the premiership on the grounds that only he could redeem his contradictory promises.

APPEALING TO ALL ENGLISH CAMPS

Still, it is becoming clear that we have merely seen the return of a familiar old character from the Brexit multiverse: Boris “I want to have my cake and eat it, too” Johnson. Johnson’s assertive new policy marks a commitment to, well, all sides. It appeals to the weak and the strong, the opportunists and pessimists. Thus, when it comes to domestic affairs, Johnson will aggressively use the escape from the EU to deploy state aid to his supporters working in struggling industries. He will not keep weak old industrial towns on life support though, but rather transform them into tech hubs of the kind beloved by his business-friendly supporters.

This domestic agenda bears the fingerprints of Johnson’s chief advisor, Dominic Cummings. If it had a slogan, it would echo the “Laptops and Lederhosen” approach of rural Bavaria. It is complemented by a global agenda seemingly inspired by Tony Abbott, who was appointed trade adviser last week. Abbott’s slogan could be summed up as “Coal and China.” Indeed, Australia’s ex-prime minister is being sold as the man who protected traditional industries while grabbing economic opportunities in the East.

To realize this broad new agenda, Johnson will need the EU and its member states to make considerable concessions. Yet his opening salvo has alienated leaders in Brussels, who have reminded the British of their duty to the rule of law and basic fair play. He has disquieted member states, too. The UK’s traditional allies in the east had been watching the parallel UK Defense Review with concern, unable to tell whether the UK was engaged in modernization or a retreat from its international obligations. The answer now seems clear: both.

FORTUNE DOES NOT ALWAYS FAVOR THE BOLD

Might the UK’s chutzpah nevertheless play out in its favor? On big ticket items like trade, the Commission is firmly in charge, and it will likely carry on as before. Still, a smaller field such as EU internal security cooperation could be ripe for Britain’s snatch and grab policy. It has long been speculated that the UK is interested in a “mini-deal” with selected members – quick and dirty access to its pick of EU security databases without the oversight of EU institutions. The UK’s interior minister, Home Secretary Priti Patel, is due to meet a small group of her EU counterparts next week.

If British opportunism will work anywhere, then in that field. Sub-groups of European states do still club together to forge ahead without the EU scaffolding, and they are looking to do so in precisely the fields which preoccupy Cummings: the management of largescale databases and the harvesting and exchange of personal data. These sub-groups are also seeking novel ways to handle matters on which Abbott is focusing, for example the undermining of Western standards by autocratic states such as Russia, Turkey, and China.

But while Britain's diplomatic pyrotechnics may have shaken these sub-groups, it has not made cooperation any easier. The great weakness of the EU's data regime is fragmentation, meaning any new project would need to link up the full range of databases. Its great strength – at least when it comes to Turkey, Russia, and China – is its oversight by liberal EU institutions. The UK discounts itself from both. It is confirmation that the British government is not so much trying to build international relationships as it is to clear obstacles to its national agenda.

GHOSTS OF BRITAIN'S FUTURE

As the government's agenda crystallizes, it is becoming clear that it is more than an attempt to keep opposing camps happy. While Johnson's advisors acknowledge that strange bedfellows voted for Brexit, they do not ascribe their support to ignorance of the implications or to Johnson's loose promises. Instead, they believe it reflects the times: Britain finds itself poised between international success and catastrophe. Very different groups feel this acutely, and very different groups understood that leaving the EU was key.

Johnson's advisors are drawing a parallel to an earlier period of British history. They recall the early phase of the

empire in the 1590s, when a poor but opportunistic England was able to pick apart the pompous empires of the Indian Subcontinent, devouring all but their most cohesive parts. They believe Britain has an opportunity to return to that opportunistic phase, but it might be gobbled up by bigger powers if it stays locked into EU institutions.

So how does the UK grab global opportunities and avoid being devoured by China or India? History has an answer: be piratical. Avoid making commitments to status quo powers like the EU. Avoid holding territory, even the remnants of England's "first empire," Northern Ireland and Scotland. Build the capacity to master the high seas of the modern era, the virtual realm. Mixed into this is the impish desire to singe the beard of big continental empires – notably, today's Universal Monarchy, the EU.

Europeans have generally chalked up the United Kingdom's decision to leave the EU to nostalgia for a time when Britain "ruled the waves." They would do well to revise this idea. It is, in fact, Europeans who are waxing nostalgic for the positive legacy of Britain's period of high empire – its liberal internationalism, global responsibility, and sense of fair play. Today's UK is pursuing a darker ghost of empire. This piratical old Britain will "waive the rules."

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